



# CONSERVATION PLANNING





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# A MESSAGE FROM NCPP

**N**ot since Hugh Hammond Bennett, the father of soil conservation, made his impassioned plea to Congress to save our nation's precious soil more than 80 years ago have Americans become so aware of our vital connection to this living and life-giving resource.

And for good reason.



**“THE FUTURE of our children and grandchildren is rooted in improving and sustaining the health and function of our natural resources.”**

Today's farmers and ranchers are faced with a seemingly impossible task— to feed a rapidly growing global population with fewer farmable acres, less fresh water, and more pronounced climate change. More than ever before, American farmers and ranchers have come to understand that the future of our children and grandchildren is rooted in improving and sustaining the

health and function of our natural resources.

How do we increase farm productivity and profitability? Reduce the off-site impact of nutrients and fertilizers on water quality? Improve farm resiliency? Reduce flooding and hold more water in the soil profile? Sequester more carbon? Increase wildlife and pollinator habitat?

Improve the condition of our forests and grazing lands? Reduce agricultural energy use?

The answers to these questions will emerge with the help of state-of-the-art, comprehensive conservation planning. High-quality conservation plans can transform our future by giving landowners and operators step-by-step recommendations they can use to improve wildlife habitat, pest management, soil health, and yields while reducing energy and input costs.

But this can only be achieved if we plan — only if we work with farmers and ranchers to integrate the management of the natural resources they rely on with the business objectives that guide their operations.

For that reason, the **National Conservation Planning**

**Partnership (NCPP)** was formed to emphasize the critical role that conservation planning plays in advancing voluntary conservation efforts on private lands. NCPP is made up of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA), the National Conservation District Employees Association (NCDEA), and the National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils (NARC&DC).

As a conservation partnership, we have signed a memorandum of understanding to bring our staff and members' greatest skills, strengths, energy, and passion to this endeavor.

In doing so we will help farmers and ranchers improve the health of our communities,

## WE ARE WORKING together to:

1. Reinvigorate conservation planning;
2. Improve the partnership's capacity to deliver one-on-one conservation planning assistance;
3. Ensure the delivery of technically sound, science-based assistance; and
4. Build a workforce of strong conservation planners.



**“ENDURING CONSERVATION**  
can only be achieved if we plan — only if we work with individual farmers and ranchers on their land to connect the soil and the other natural resources they manage with the business enterprises they operate. ”





*Hugh Hammond Bennett, first Chief of the Soil Conservation Service*

make our farms more resilient to extreme weather, maintain or increase production, store more carbon, and improve our water and wildlife resources. Best of all, we do not have to sacrifice production for conservation, or profitability for sustainability.

If Bennett were with us today, he would urge us to embrace the process he championed: conservation planning that sustains and improves our soil and other natural resources. The successful first chapter of our history was made possible through a strong vision, effective partnerships, and the cooperation of farmers and ranchers nationwide.

Together, NCPP will endeavor to write the next chapter in our history— based on the same principles— as we focus on the next generation of conservation planning. Together, we will leave a signature of sustainable stewardship upon this great land.

### Signed by the following National Conservation Planning Partnership Leaders

Jason Weller, Chief, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Lee McDaniel, President, National Association of Conservation Districts

Olga Walter, President, National Association of Resource Conservation & Development Councils

Adrian Baber, President, National Association of State Conservation Agencies

Tim Riley, President, National Conservation District Employees Association

“ TOGETHER, WE WILL LEAVE A SIGNATURE of sustainable stewardship upon this great land. ”



# BUILDING A CONSERVATION PLAN

“THE FOLKS AT NRCS walked around the farm with us and we just kind of brainstormed and talked about what we wanted. Then they helped guide us in the programs that they had that would match what we wanted to accomplish. Our conservation plan gives us an enthusiasm and motivation for continuing to move forward in creating a dream that we want here.”

—Theresa Lackey  
Boone County, Missouri



“ THERE IS NO VIRTUE in planning merely for the sake of planning. Unless plans can be translated into action, planning becomes a profitless mental exercise. ”

—Hugh Hammond Bennett,  
Chief, Soil Conservation Service

## CONSERVATION PLANNING THEN

In Hugh Hammond Bennett’s time, farmers worked the land hard without much concern for long-term sustainability. After they wore the land out, they moved to the next plot, treating the soil as if it were an indestructible resource.

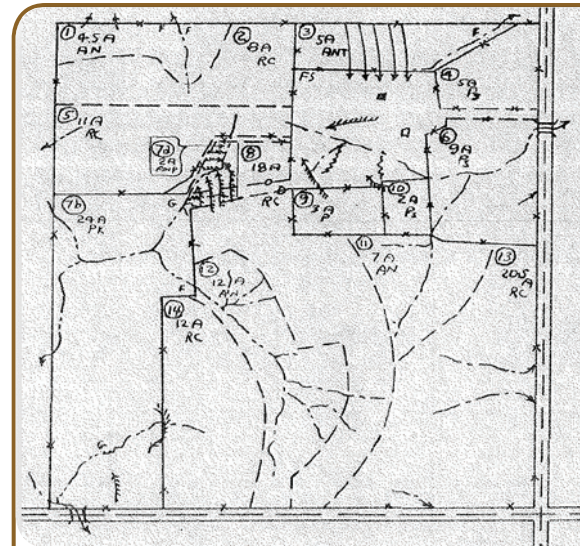
Bennett knew better, and in 1933, he convinced Congress, USDA, and farmers to protect agricultural land through a system of conservation practices.

Bennett recognized that every acre is unique and deserving of a tailored management plan developed by a soil conservationist. He

stressed that conservation plans belonged to the landowner — not to the conservationist — and therefore should be created and implemented in partnership with landowners.

From 1935 through 1985, conservation planning was core to NRCS (formerly the Soil Conservation Service) operations. The concept was to develop and implement conservation plans utilizing the technical expertise of the conservation partners and the financial and physical inputs of farmers.

Some communities recognized that what was done on one farm could positively or negatively impact other farms or landowners downstream.



Example of an early conservation plan map

Farmers began to work with each other to do group planning, being sensitive to the off-site impacts of their operations.



# CONSERVATION PLANNING NOW

**F**rom 1985 until today, conservation planning has continued to be an essential component of protecting our nation's natural resources, however the planning environment has become increasingly complex. Recent times have brought greater sophistication of land managers and agricultural producers, amplified intricacy of world markets, rapid technological innovations impacting land managers' and agricultural producers' operations and business practices, and escalated public interest in food production and natural resource management.

During this time, NCPP partners' administrative and programmatic responsibilities have grown while the number of employees responsible for planning at the field level has decreased.

Planning has also evolved to include a larger, more varied customer base. Gone are the days when most people farmed their own land and conservation planners worked mainly with one farmer or rancher on that farm or ranch. Today, many of our planners work with a variety of customers, including farm operators, non-operating landowners, farm management companies, non-profit organizations, universities, community co-ops, and others. These types of operations range from traditional row crop farms and livestock ranches to organic crop and forestry operations.

Watershed planning has been an important part of our mission since the beginning. However, the landscape-scale planning we do today requires a different skill set as we develop

conservation plans to address complex resource issues on a multi-state or regional basis, such as hypoxia in the Gulf of Mexico and Great Lakes Basin, severe flooding in the Red River basin, and threatened or endangered species such as the monarch butterfly or lesser prairie-chicken. These science-based, voluntary, and locally-led efforts bring together large groups of private landowners, operators, government agencies, and partners to leverage funding and other resources to find solutions.

On the more traditional farm or ranch today, most conservation planning efforts are tied to financial assistance programs and are completed on an "as requested" basis. In high workload counties, customers who want a conservation plan are often placed on a waiting list.



“When I inherited my mother's farm, it was in pretty bad shape and I wanted to improve it. I knew that my first step to fixing it was working with my District Conservationist Wayne Shafer to get a plan and learn more about our options.”

—Denny Busch  
Farmer, Winterset, Iowa



“**TWENTY YEARS AGO** I needed a conservation plan that would help make my land more productive and reduce erosion. Today, my conservation plan helps me provide assurance to both my customers and state environmental regulators that I am farming in ways that meet their quality standards.”

—Wade Troutman,  
Open Heart Ranch, Bridgeport, Washington

# CONSERVATION PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

**T**he future of conservation planning combines the very best of Bennett’s planning concepts with the talent of our workforce and tomorrow’s technology.

NCPP is making quality conservation planning on America’s private lands a national priority. Our customers can expect a conservation plan that is innovative, enhances their decision-making process, and provides durable results in conservation systems implementation. They can expect a planning experience

that is timely, individualized, and comprehensive based on their goals and the land’s unique natural resource features.

Our efforts are focused on accelerating the adoption of conservation systems (a

combination of one or more conservation measures or management practices) that addresses the resource concerns and leads to the greatest return on investment for the producer and the environment. These practices improve the land’s capacity



to rebound after extreme weather events, such as droughts or floods. They also improve soil health, maximize carbon storage in soils, and help producers improve their bottom lines by reducing energy and input costs.

Many of our farmers today require a conservation plan that provides a level of certainty to their customers or complies with environmental regulations.

To provide field staff with the support they need to navigate and solve our customers' most challenging resource concerns, NCPP has developed a strategy. Our strategy ensures our field staff have the right expertise, are stationed in the right locations, and have enough time to work one-on-one with our diverse customer base.

NCPP is preparing our workforce by expanding our training and certification programs to develop and maintain the skills needed by our field staff to be successful. Emphasis will be placed on the economic benefits of conservation, landscape-scale planning, soil health improvement, knowledge sharing across the conservation partnership, and confidently communicating with our customers in a way that leads to an understanding about the natural resources on their land.

We will deliver sound, science-based technical assistance to our customers by developing and/or staying current on cutting-edge conservation tools and techniques. We are designing, improving, and implementing tools that will streamline administrative work through the Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative (CDSI).



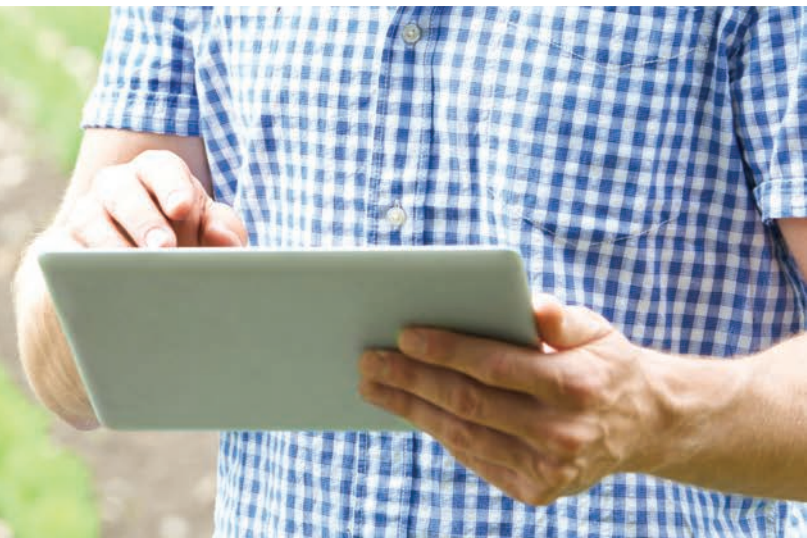
*We are working with partners to support customers in urban areas.*

Our goal is to improve overall efficiency and effectiveness so that our field staff have more time to provide our customers with quality conservation plans. Other tools, such as the CDSI Conservation Client Gateway, will provide our customers more ways to interact with us and access information, at any time they please.

We are working with our conservation partners to expand our capacity to deliver



**CONSERVATION PLANNING**  
in the future combines the very best of Bennett's planning concepts with the talent of our workforce and tomorrow's technology.



the same science-based conservation planning and technical services to our customers who live in urban areas or on tribal lands, have just started farming, farm organic or specialty crops, or once served in the military.

We are exploring opportunities to leverage private sector technology and expertise to deliver precision agriculture solutions and economic and natural resource data to help our customers make informed decisions.

We are placing an emphasis on connecting with our

customers and providing a quality conservation planning experience that begins with a visit to discuss the customer's goals, operational needs, and issues related to production and natural resources on their land. The planner will then work with the customer to create real-life, practical solutions to help improve and protect soils, improve water quality and water management, and maintain farm viability. A complete resource inventory and evaluation will be conducted. Based on those results, conservation practices will be recommended to improve long-term sustainability and

maintain the productivity of the land.

Specialized plans may be developed to address specific resource concerns such as excessive nutrients, pest management, wildlife habitat decline, invasives, or poor pastureland.

Once the alternatives are developed, the customer will decide on the practices and schedule that best meet his or her land-management goals.

The conservation planner will continue to evaluate and assist the farmer or rancher as they implement and revise their plan as needs change.



**“A CONSERVATION PLAN** is a huge plus, and we've always had one; the soil has to make a living for me and I want to take care of it. A conservation plan helps me think ahead, it provides direction, and documents what we've done.”

—George Van Wychen, Wisconsin Farmer, Brown County Wisconsin



During the planning process, the conservation planner works closely with the landowner or operator to:

1. Discuss farming, ranching, or other land management objectives;
2. Examine natural resource concerns and opportunities;
3. Point out areas for possible protection, restoration and improvement;
4. Discuss economic goals for the farm, current farming operations, and future plans;
5. Review recommendations for conservation systems or individual practices, and
6. Weigh alternatives.

# THE CONSERVATION PLAN

**T**he conservation plan of the future will have a new look and feel, but will also retain its timeless usefulness as a tool to help guide land-use decisions that maintain productivity and improve the environment.

For more than eighty years, conservation planning with farmers and ranchers has been the backbone of the conservation partnership.

The conservation plan, in the past and present, is a joint effort through a close conservation planner-customer relationship that identifies the customer's conservation objectives and assesses and analyzes the natural resources issues related to soil, water, animals, plants, air, energy, and human interaction, as well as the opportunities on that customer's land. The plan offers alternatives, documents decisions, records progress and successful completion of conservation practices and systems, and provides guidance and direction for continued maintenance of conservation systems.

The plan may include items such as a land use map, soils information, photos, inventory of resources, economic costs and benefits, schedule of recommended practices, maintenance schedules, and engineering notes — all based on the producer's goals and the resource needs.

The plan is written in a clear, step-by-step format that meets each individual customer's needs. Customers choose options that suit their circumstances and time schedule.

Conservation planners are there every step of the way to update or assist with the implementation of plans as needed.

The conservation planning process helps landowners, operators, communities, and planners work together to identify and address their resource needs and accomplish multiple objectives that are best for the land and the environment.

Conservation planning is critical to our nation's long-term sustainability and agricultural productivity.

## **BENEFITS TO A CONSERVATION PLAN MAY INCLUDE:**

- 1.** Increasing the overall effectiveness of recommended systems or individual conservation practices;
- 2.** Setting up an implementation schedule that fits the customer's timetable and resources;
- 3.** Improving the customer's bottom line;
- 4.** Complying with environmental regulations;
- 5.** Improving water, soil, and air quality;
- 6.** Creating or improving wildlife habitat;
- 7.** Adapting to the customer's changing needs or goals; and
- 8.** Marketing advantages through demonstrated sustainability.



# NATIONAL CONSERVATION PLANNING PARTNERSHIP (NCP) STRATEGY

**I**n 2015, the five national conservation organizations that share the critical role of leading conservation planning and advancing voluntary conservation efforts on private lands created NCP. We recognize and value conservation planning as a science-based process that guides landowners, operators, and other decision makers as they seek to achieve their conservation, production, and economic objectives.

## TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION

**Goal:** Improve the knowledge, skills, and abilities of field staff who work with customers to develop and implement conservation plans.

The technical expertise of our field staff is critical to working effectively with our diverse customers. To ensure our field staff acquire and maintain necessary skills, we will provide appropriate training in technical assistance, communications, and other disciplines as needed.

## VISION

Improved and enhanced conservation delivery to our customers by a highly-skilled conservation partnership workforce through improved training, tools, capacity, and experience.

## OBJECTIVES

NCP has four overarching objectives:

1. Reinvigorate conservation planning;
2. Improve the conservation partnership's capacity to deliver conservation planning assistance;
3. Ensure the delivery of technically sound, science-based assistance; and
4. Build a workforce of strong conservation planners.

To achieve these objectives, five emphasis teams have been established. They are:

1. Training and certification;
2. Technical processes, tools, and integration;
3. Communications and messaging;
4. Outreach and partnerships; and
5. Outcomes and accountability.

**Actions include:** Creating a national database that identifies conservation planners by certification levels and location; revising NRCS national policy to clarify and streamline the certification process and to provide guidance for conservation partnership staff; and developing new, or expanding current training programs, such as Conservation Planning Boot Camp, to include partnership field staff.

## TECHNICAL PROCESSES, TOOLS, AND INTEGRATION

**Goal:** Improve the technical, science-based tools, techniques, and processes used by our field staff to develop and help customers carry out conservation plans that address natural resource concerns.

Long-term conservation success depends on easy to access, user-friendly, and science-based information and technology that meets the needs of our field staff and customers.

**Actions include:** Launching the Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative's Conservation Desktop and Mobile Planning Tool; enhancing the Customer Service Toolkit; expanding the use of conservation approval authority for all practices throughout the partnership, and increasing the use of Conservation Client Gateway.

## COMMUNICATIONS AND MESSAGING

**Goal:** Improve communications so the importance and benefits of conservation planning within the partnership and our respective agencies and organizations are elevated internally as well as in the eyes of existing and potential customers.

We are extending our reach to farmers, ranchers, and units of government who do not have conservation plans or are beyond our historical networks to reach beginning farmers, veterans, urban farmers, and other new audiences.

**Actions include:** Conducting baseline and follow-up assessments of internal and external customers to identify their needs; creating a comprehensive communication strategy including a variety of new marketing products; and organizing a national conservation planning symposium.

## OUTREACH AND PARTNERSHIPS

**Goal:** Develop and implement a strategy to strengthen and enhance the conservation partnership at all levels in a way that leverages each partner's strengths, resources, and expertise.

Improving the conservation partnership's overall capacity is key to successful conservation planning. The ultimate goal is to get the right number of field staff with the right skills in the right locations to address customer and natural resource needs.

We are leveraging our resources to free up conservation planners and give them time in the field for quality conservation planning. We are also working to identify private sector partners who can provide precision agriculture and economic data to producers.

**Actions include:** Hiring additional technical field staff in key locations; establishing program support assistants to assist with contract management; establishing a mentoring program for new planners; and providing

additional technical assistance and support to small, organic, urban, and specialty crop farmers.


## OUTCOMES AND ACCOUNTABILITY

**Goal:** Improve the methods used to determine goals, measure performance and outcomes, and ensure accountability related to our conservation planning efforts.

Our conservation successes are often measured in acres treated or program dollars obligated, but those benchmarks only tell a small part of conservation's story. We are seeking opportunities to expand the conservation benefits dialogue beyond the traditional ecological and economic gains, to greater individual and societal benefits that lead to more

adoption and implementation of conservation practices on the landscape.

**Actions include:** Identifying and/or developing a system to track partnership-wide performance to gauge the success and effectiveness of the conservation planning training and certification, and using modeling programs such as the Conservation Effects Assessment Program (CEAP) to evaluate, quantify, and communicate conservation benefits.



“ **WITH GOOD CONSERVATION PLANNING** and the right set of conservation measures in place on our farm, there are direct economic benefits. We've seen overall increases in yield and crop health accompanied by overall decreases in expensive inputs like fertilizers and water. Improved pollinator habitat increased honey production. High tunnels have helped us to extend our growing season with minimal resource inputs. All of this means the farm is not only more profitable, but it means we can spend this extra income to employ more local people and utilize local services to keep the farm running. ”

—Matt Tracy

*Red Planet Vegetables (Organic, CSA) Johnston, Rhode Island*





# CONSERVATION ROAD MAP

The Conservation Partnership uses a nine step planning process to provide assistance to our customers and develop a conservation plan.

- 1. Identify Problems and Opportunities** - Initial opportunities and problems are first identified while working with the customer.
- 2. Determine Objectives** - The customer identifies their objectives, while the planner guides the process so that it includes the customer's needs and values, the resource uses and on-site and off-site ecological protection.
- 3. Inventory Resources** - Natural resource, economic, and social information for the planning area is collected to further define problems and opportunities, develop alternatives, and evaluate the plan.
- 4. Analyze Resource Data** - The planner studies the resource data and defines existing conditions for all the identified natural resources, including limitations and potentials for the desired use.
- 5. Formulate Alternatives** - Alternatives are formulated that achieve the customer's objectives, solve identified concerns, and take advantage of opportunities to improve or protect resource conditions.
- 6. Evaluate Alternatives** - Alternatives are evaluated to determine their effectiveness in addressing the customer's problems, opportunities and objectives.
- 7. Make Decisions** - The customer selects their preferred alternatives and works with the planner on practice implementation.
- 8. Implement the Plan** - The customer implements the selected alternatives. The planner provides the land manager with detailed practice implementation information.
- 9. Evaluate the Plan** - The planner evaluates the effectiveness of the plan in solving the resource concerns and works with the customer to make adjustments as needed.

# KEY PRINCIPLES FOR VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION ON PRIVATE LANDS

As a conservation partnership we continue to fulfill the conservation legacy established in 1935 by Hugh Hammond Bennett. Although our responsibilities and roles have changed and our natural resource challenges have increased, many of Bennett's ideas and principles about the critical role of conservation planning have withstood the test of time and still greatly inform our work today.

- 1.** We can't do conservation work only from behind a desk or windshield. We must walk the land, engage with the landowner/landuser, and see firsthand the natural resource challenges and opportunities.
- 2.** Good science must be the foundation for voluntary conservation on private lands.
- 3.** Natural resources concerns cannot be treated in isolation; soil, water, air, plants, animals, and humans are all part of an integrated system with interdependencies.
- 4.** Coordinated action must be focused on a watershed- or landscape-scale to gain the greatest positive and sustainable conservation outcomes.
- 5.** Local leadership is critical to success; federal and state agencies must work in collaboration with local leadership to achieve desired conservation outcomes.







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